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Pliny's Letters to Tacitus

Letter writing has been said to be one of the lost arts of this age. The remarkable inventions for prompt communication and the strenuous rush of life itself have removed the conditions conducive to the ripe perfection of this art. But, as with other lost arts, its best examples fill us with admiration and a desire to get at the secret of their charm. For no species of literature gives us quite the unique delight that the letters of a bright mind afford us; whether it be a Cicero, who in his eight hundred letters paints us a more vivid picture of a man with all his faults than any amount of "confessions" could give us; or a Madame de Sevigne with her inimitable grace or art,—the charm is the same. It has been claimed by the hypercritical that this pleasure is akin to the emotion in the breast of the eaves-dropping butler at the keyhole. We feel such an insinuation untrue, and especially so in the case of Pliny, for he was his own editor. He gives nothing to the world that he does not wish it to know. His letters, then, have not quite the spontaneous charm we find in some others. They are written in conscious and admiring imitation of Cicero. Yet Pliny is so original in many ways, so blithe and genial, he gives us so unique a picture of the second century of the Empire, that we are glad that he has obtained the desire for immortality which always haunted him. Though his letters to his friend Tacitus are but eleven in number, several of them mere notes at that, among them are to be found not only some of the most interesting and characteristic epistles of the nine books, but they contain some of the brightest, freshest Latin of his times. At his best he is even a worthy rival of Tacitus, immeasurably the greater genius. In these as in all his letters we see the polished, cultured, brilliant lawyer and dilettante. His self-complacency, from its very frankness, does not affect us disagreeably. It is not so insistent and tiresome as Cicero's. Then with all his idiosyncrasies, Pliny is, as a rule, sane in his point of view and above all exhibits a steady cheerfulness, that indispensable handmaiden of perfect sanity. Yet, fond as we are of Pliny, we must confess that he is at times a prig, though a most engaging one. For instance, with him, as with his uncle, the Elder Pliny, industry became a perfect fetish. He is kin to those trying people who master Hebrew in the spare minutes before meals. Lying down, eating, bathing, he was never without some book from which he took notes or extracts. For, as he tells us of his uncle "dicere solebat nullum esse librum tam malum ut non aliqua parte prodesset". This same uncle

chides him for taking a walk. "You could not afford to lose all this time." Again, we can picture the little prig of fourteen near at work on his Greek tragedy of which he tells us later with a certain satisfaction.

We are not at all surprised at the description he gives Tacitus of a boar hunt in the Sabine Hills. What can a man with any real sportsman blood think of this. "You will laugh and you will do well to laugh. For I, yes I, whom you know so well, have captured three wild boars and fine ones at that. 'Not Pliny!' you exclaim; Yes, Pliny! Not, however, that I have entirely deserted my habits of unremitting study. I took up my position near the hunting nets. By my side lay—not a hunting spear and lance, but pencil and paper. I would sketch out some work and jot down notes, so that, even if I went home empty handed, I might at least bring back a full note book." This is indeed an odd encomium upon the charms of hunting. How he ever succeeded in really capturing three boars is a mystery to us.

The famous description which he gives Tacitus of the fatal eruption of Vesuvius, in which the elder Pliny lost his life in attempting to study as closely as possible this remarkable phenomenon, shows him again in his character of posing pedant, even in the face of death. "He (my uncle) asked me if I wished to accompany him. I answered that I preferred to study, for as it happened he had prepared a task for me." Imagine a boy of seventeen refusing and with such a reason to go to a fire and such a fire!

We cannot help but admire the elder man, foolhardy as he was, when he orders his sailing master to steer straight into danger; when he calms the fears of those about him by pursuing the even tenor of his way, ordering his bath, cheerfully eating his dinner, even enjoying some good, honest snores while taking a nap. Admirable even to the moment of his final suffocation.

In the meantime our Pliny was affording an imitation in burlesque of the stolid attitude of his uncle. Note his pose in all the fear and excitement surrounding him. "I demanded a volume of Titus Livy (!) and read as if entirely undisturbed and even went on taking notes. Lo, a Spanish friend of my uncle, when he saw my mother and me sitting quietly, while I was even reading, chided her for her patience, and me for my unconcern. None the less diligently did I pursue my reading." His refusal to seek safety while uncertain of the fate of his uncle and his tender care of his mother in their common terror give us a glimpse of his deeper nature. They were saved only to hear of their great loss.

LOCAL PATRONS

J F BENDERNAGEL

W S BLAKE

W B GUNNISON

CARL F KAYSER

C D LARKINS

JACOB W MACK

W H MAXWELL

W L HERVEY

J MICKLEBOROUGH

H T PECK

T P PETERS

W H RICHARDSON

C E ROBERTSON

N A SHAW

E G SIHLER

A S SOMERS

J R THOMPSON

AUGUST ULMANN

W T VLYMEN

E G WARD

SCHOLARSHIP
PATRONS

Jas F Bendernagel
Hiram H Bice
W S Blake
O P Conant
H R M Cook
C H J Douglas
Mary R Fitzpatrick
J W Fleming
W B Gunnison
Eugene W Harter
Irving A Hazen
Walter L Hervey
Archibald L Hodges
David H Holmes
Charles E Jefferson
Carl F Kayser
Charles D Larkins
Jacob W Mack
William H Maxwell
W S S Newton
Wm J O'Leary
Thomas P Peters
W H Richardson
Chas E Robertson
John A Sanford
N Archibald Shaw
Arthur S Somers
S G Stacey
John R Thompson
Harry F Towle
August Ulmann
William T Vlymen
Edward G Ward

The following year he enters at Rome upon his career as a lawyer and on that long and intimate friendship with Tacitus, the most brilliant lawyer under the Flavian Caesars. They send each other their writings for criticism. Pliny revising Tacitus is almost as startling as Nahum Tate "improving" the plays of Shakespeare. It is his pride and joy to be spoken of together with Tacitus. He says with his usual naive vanity, "It seems easy for me to imitate you, for nature has made us alike (!), and indeed you are worthy of imitation; I rejoice all the more, then, because, when literature is talked of, we are named together, for I at once occur to the minds of those who speak of you".

A stranger at Rome sitting next to Tacitus at the games asks him after some learned conversation who he is. "You know me and that from your reading", the historian replied; "Are you Tacitus or Pliny?" asked the stranger. We can picture with what glee Pliny retailed this story.

From Lake Como, his native place and one of the perfect spots on God's earth, he writes to Tacitus asking him to look up some desirable professors for a public high school that he wishes to start. He makes the strongest sort of plea for public education. Do we not detect an almost modern note in the following? "I would even pledge it all (money for the teachers' salaries) did I not fear that my gift might be perverted by jobbery, as I notice happens in many towns where teachers are engaged at public expense." To prevent such a scandal he advocates the appointment of parents only for the school board. But what an excellent member of the board this childless man would have made.

Without genius and well supplied with human frailties as he is, we find Pliny more lovable than most of our classical friends. He was just and clean in the midst of every kind of corruption. This genial and generous gentleman has well earned what he so much desired—an honest place in the minds and hearts of posterity.

EUGENE W. HARTER

A Stricture on Professor Seasurface

New York City, Sept. 27, 1900.

To the Editors of the Latin Leaflet:

I was most pleased and interested in reading the delightful letter of your correspondent, Professor Seasurface, in your issue of Oct. 8, and in noticing the applications of his critical acumen and his clear mental vision, which seemed in many cases simply microscopic in its power. As I am myself only an ordinary teacher and blessed with perhaps less than the average amount of scholarship, I hailed as an utterance ex cathedra his statement that all Datives were Datives of the Indirect Object, though I afterwards looked it up in Gildersleeve, to be sure.

Since reading his letter, however, I have been trying to satisfy my mind as to what I should do in the light of the implication contained in his report of what Mr. Errs did not have done with his "Dative of the Indirect Object". I endeavor to teach my pupils that the grammar is a fairly trust-

worthy instrument of investigation, but I open it (we use Allen & Greenough's) to the Dative Case, and I find these uses: Indirect Object with Transitives, Indirect Object with Intransitives, Datives with Special Verbs, Dative with Compounds, Dative of Possession, Dative of the Agent, Dative of the Purpose or End, Dative with Adjectives, Dative of Reference and Ethical Dative. I open other grammars, even Gildersleeve's, and I find nearly the same general classification. I infer that Professor Seasurface took the pupil's answer "Dative of the Indirect Object" as inclusive of all these, but was not Mr. Errs justified in believing, from what he knew of the pupil's familiarity with Allen & Greenough, that he meant "Dative of the Indirect Object with Transitives or Intransitives", and that the only further differentiation which the pupil could rightly be expected to make was between these two?

I suppose that I ought to be sorry to say so, but I must confess that I feel with Mr. Errs in the matter, that he was teaching his pupils to rely upon a good grammar, and to use the classifications therein given, leaving it to persons of experience in such matters to construct a perfect grammar, and not troubling immature minds with questions upon which the grammarians themselves are not in perfect agreement, and which properly belong to the course in college.

AN ORDINARY TEACHER

Professor Seasurface Replies

Professor Seasurface, to whom a copy of the above was sent by way of courtesy, replies that his Ordinary friend is entirely mistaken in inferring that Mr. Errs was using the A. & G. Grammar in the class whose work he had the pleasure and profit of reviewing on the occasion in question. But he maintains that no pupil's familiarity with any grammar, or teacher's either, for that matter, should be taken altogether for granted, and further, that any grammar which would lead teachers or pupils to be satisfied with such incomplete answers as the one specified would be a bad grammar to use. But a grammar, after all, can be held only for what it actually teaches, not for what those are pleased to learn from it who are so modest in their claims.

Professor Seasurface admires the cleverness with which the A. & G. Grammar is referred to above, and although this grammar was not in use in the class in question (A O T seems quite positively to infer that it was), he would be among the first to give due credit to this "good grammar", and would certainly feel not only like giving it frequent mention, but also like defending it and its authors from any of its friends who would accuse it of failing to differentiate fairly well in the matter of the Dative constructions. He still maintains that to call a Dative of Possession an Indirect Object, and be satisfied, is bad, although the chances are that it is indirect object of some form of the verb "sum"; that to call a Dative with an Adjective an Indirect Object, and be satisfied, is bad, although it is indirect object of the adjective; that to call a Dative, which is Indirect Object of a Transitive